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SUBJECT British Scandals

ROGER MUDD: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher today did what many political leaders do when a major scandal looms -- she ducked.

Since the weekend when it became public that a spy had been operating at a top-secret intelligence gathering center, controversy has, as they say, swirled.

Steve Mallory reports.

STEVE MALLORY: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was expected to answer questions in Parliament today about a new British spy scandal, but she didn't.

Some Members of Parliament believe she's trying to cover-up what many think is the country's most damaging espionage scandal since World War II. A cover-up seems to be a habit of British governments.

In one of today's newspapers, the Prime Minister was depicted in a cartoon trying to plug the security leaks. The latest leak centers around this electronic eavesdropping center in Cheltenham, western England. How bad a leak is unknown to the public and maybe British intelligence as well.

MAN: But it may be certainly that they're not aware at the moment of the full extent of the leak and indeed, therefore, the damage to our security services.

MALERY: The Guy Burgess-Donald Maclean affair during the 1950s is one of the most sensational British spy scandals. They defected to the Soviet Union when another spy warned them they

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had been uncovered.

The third man, Kim Philby, himself defected years later when authorities finally suspected him of spying. A fourth spy in that affair, Anthony Blount, wasn't named until 1979. Blount had confessed years earlier and was granted immunity but the government kept the affair secret.

This spy ring was recruited at Cambridge University by the Soviets during the 1930s. All of the men had been respectable, intellectuals from the establishment. The suspect in the later scandal isn't a graduate of Oxford or Cambridge. Geoffrey Prime was a middle level interpreter at the Cheltenham Center.

Details of the intelligence breakdown there won't be made public until his trial next month.

Considering the country's history of security leaks, one British commentator questioned his country's intelligence service.

MAN: If I were an American intelligence man I wouldn't put any confidence in the securities here. I don't...

Steve Mallory, NBC News, London.